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C O N F I D E N T I A L KATHMANDU 002518

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SUBJECT: STUDENT POLITICS IN NEPAL: NOT YOUR COLLEGE COUNCIL

REF: A. KATHMANDU 1966

¶B. KATHMANDU 1976

Classified By: Ambassador James F. Moriarty. Reasons 1.4 (b/d).

SUMMARY AND INTRODUCTION

¶1. (C) Student organizations - the starting point for many Nepalese leaders - have been instrumental in stimulating political change during the past 60 years. Students have been able to operate when and where mainstream politicians could not. Student organizations were the legal arms of political parties when multi-party politics was illegal. They organized mass demonstrations and protested for democracy. After the 1990 pro-democracy movement, student politics became a de facto career option. Today, student politicians are focused on provoking change from the grassroots level. Our young interlocutors expressed frustration with roadblocks to change, including apathy among youth and nepotism among political leaders and their student-wing lackeys. They noted their disagreements with the policies of the parties with which they were affiliated, and stated a desire to alert the Nepalese people that alternatives existed. Progressive student leaders often have a finger on the pulse of popular sentiments and are willing to use all resources regardless of risk. Therefore, over time, they could become a major challenge to the mainstream political parties, drastically changing the dynamics of the fledgling democracy. End Summary.

AN HISTORICAL, SYMBIOTIC RELATIONSHIP

¶2. (SBU) Student organizations play an important role in agitating the masses to pay attention to Nepalese politics, and many national leaders came into prominence while involved in student efforts. Both Deputy Prime Ministers KP Oli and Amik Sherchan began their careers in leftist student politics. Former Prime Minister and Nepali Congress - Democratic President Sher Bahadur Deuba was President of the Nepal Students Union (NSU) in 1971. Political parties and their sister student organizations have a symbiotic relationship with roots in the pro-democracy revolution of ¶1950. Many of the people who rebelled against the Rana regime were students who had been exiled to India in 1947 for

participating in the Jayatu Sanksritam ("Victory to Sanskrit") movement to expand the university curriculum. The students in exile, inspired by Mahatma Gandhi's Quit India movement, returned to Nepal to push for democracy. During the following decade of pseudo-multi-party democracy, university students turned their attention toward campus well-being. They created student federations to raise awareness about student rights. The new organizations represented students from different regions rather than different ideologies. The rulers of the one-party Panchayat system that King Mahendra constructed in 1960 viewed the student federations as officially non-partisan, and allowed them to continue their activities.

POLITICIZATION OF STUDENT FEDERATIONS

¶3. (SBU) Oppression during the Panchayat era led to the politicization of student federations. Movements that began to improve the quality of education quickly took on ideological stances against the Panchayat. In 1970, the Nepali Congress Party (NC) formed the NSU in response to the All-Nepal National Free Students' Union (ANNFSU), which had become a Communist stronghold. The NSU and ANNFSU, along with other student organizations, held elections for a Free Student Union (FSU), a national student government and a proxy for democracy that could not occur at a state level. (Note: Currently, the FSU consists of students at Nepal's two state-owned universities - Tribhuvan and Mahendra Sanskrit - and their affiliated colleges and institutes spread throughout the country. The three private universities in Nepal - Poorvanchal, Pokhara, and Kathmandu - have only non-political student councils that serve as campus advocacy organizations, much like student governments at American schools. End note.)

STUDENT ORGANIZATIONS GIVE UP AUTONOMY

¶4. (SBU) In 1971, the Supreme Court declared an attempted Panchayat ban on student organizations unconstitutional, on the grounds that the organizations were not political. This solidified the relationship between the banned political parties and the student affiliates, with the latter serving as the legal wings of the former. By 1990, the student organizations had given up much of their autonomy and become firm limbs of parent parties, vehicles through which the parties exercised influence. In return, the students piggy-backed on the underground parties' clout to organize political dissent.

TWO PRO-DEMOCRACY MOVEMENTS: 1990

¶5. (SBU) Student organizations played an important role in the 1990 pro-democracy movement by carrying out the work that detained political party leaders were unable to do - namely, getting people onto the streets. The student organizations, committed to their parties' ideals, gained situational autonomy to coordinate protests. For the first time since 1950, students secured the possibility for positions of power in the multi-party government that followed. From 1990 onwards, they invested themselves not only in political ideology but also in legitimate political careers.

2006

¶6. (C) Student organizations again urged people onto the streets in the pro-democracy movement that culminated in mass demonstrations in April 2006. Gagan Thapa, a former NSU General Secretary who now represents a Kathmandu constituency in the NC, told Emboff that the political parties would not have been able to assemble crowds alone. The Nepalese distrusted the feckless politicians, Thapa said. He explained that the student leaders worked to persuade the people that youth who were unburdened by the power-hungry

priorities of the old guard could foment change. Thapa, a 28-year-old prominent rabble-rouser, had spearheaded the NSU's pro-democracy campaign that gained initial momentum in 2003. He was imprisoned several times following the King's 2005 royal takeover.

A CAREER IN STUDENT POLITICS?

17. (C) The length of time that one can be involved in student politics has led some to create virtual careers out of it, and a photograph of middle-aged men identified as student protesters is not an uncommon image in Nepalese media. Young idealists become active in political organizations as early as the equivalent of junior high school, and can remain a member of the student wings as long as they are enrolled in an academic institution. Central committee members who find themselves on the payroll of mainline party leaders - but who perhaps do not have a future in the main party - appear able to keep their positions indefinitely, regardless of student status.

TEACH THEM WELL AND LET THEM LEAD THE WAY

--Adhikari--

18. (C) Srijana Adhikari, Joint Secretary General of the NSU, joined her party at age 13. A decade later, she balances intermittent classwork with leading the NSU's grassroots education and women's empowerment campaigns. Adhikari is preparing to run for the NSU presidency and has her sight set on a seat in Parliament. She described growing up in Chitwan (a Terai district) during the Panchayat era and feeling dissatisfied that power rested in the hands of elite men. She noted that in the current democracy movement, many people were spouting slogans that they did not fully understand, such as calling for constituent assembly elections without knowing exactly what these elections entailed. Adhikari E

stated that people needed to be taught their rights so that they would not settle for less than equal opportunity.

--Thapa--

19. (C) Former NSU General Secretary Gagan Thapa separately described his own goal for grassroots campaigns: to convince potential voters to usher in a new, progressive generation of leaders. He opined that the 1990 pro-democracy movement failed to ingrain lasting change to Nepal's "broken" political system. Thapa told Emboff that his voter education program targeted youth between the ages of 15 and 25 - people who were too young to vote during the last national elections held in 1999. He expressed hope that increased youth and grassroots participation would allow ideologues to gain a solid footing in the parties and force current political leaders to listen to their constituents.

NSU: DISSENT AMONG THE RANKS

110. (C) Srijana Adhikari and Gagan Thapa share common goals of grassroots development and the empowerment of a new generation, but represent two extremes of NSU leadership. Adhikari is a Nepali Congress loyalist who seems willing to turn the other cheek to the nepotistic party. She condemned the obstacles that women faced in Nepalese politics, but seemed content to fight through hard work rather than rage. Thapa, on the other hand, has been a vocal critic of NC shortfalls. He explained to Emboff how student leaders spent much of the day visiting political leaders for favors and funding. He recounted how he personally had asked NC President GP Koirala to abolish this practice and alleged that his request had greatly angered Koirala. Thapa claimed that his attempts to transform NC and NSU politics led to his dismissal as NSU General Secretary in August 2004. He said that the NC postponed the NSU's 2005 convention because the

party leaders feared that students would elect Thapa and other revolutionaries. The convention was put on hold indefinitely because, Thapa maintained, the NSU leadership was content with receiving privileges from the NC leadership, and NC leaders wanted to maintain the status quo of having pliable "students" do their bidding.

A VOID IN THE COUNTRYSIDE

¶11. (C) Thapa complained to Emboff that only Maoists were willing to work in rural areas, while the political parties frolicked in the relative safety of the Kathmandu Valley. He noted that the Maoists outnumbered each of the largest political parties at the student level, approximately 35,000 young Maoists compared to 20-25,000 students each in the NSU and ANNFSU-UML. Thapa expressed concern that the Maoists would succeed in taking over the country if political party and student leaders did not recommence activity in the districts. He said that he had recently visited 18 districts to encourage youth to become politically active. He lamented that he was one of the few leaders willing to travel to potentially unsafe areas. Thapa asserted that leaders were supposed to serve the people, not other politicians, and thus had the responsibility to take risks for their constituents.

DIVERGENT AGENDAS

--The View From NC's Student Wing--

¶12. (C) Thapa stated that a political apathy stemmed in large part from the perception that student organizations mirrored the main parties in stale ideology and limited effectiveness. He stressed the need to inform people that, at least in the NSU, students had different visions than the older politicians. Thapa cited the monarchy as an example. He claimed that the NSU supported what the majority of Nepalese allegedly want, a republic, but the NC politicians wanted to toy with the idea of a constitutional monarchy. He also contended that the NSU advocated - and the NC shot down - constituent assembly elections before the Seven-Party Alliance reached an agreement to hold them. Thapa speculated that the creation of an all-youth mainstream political party

could give the other parties a run for their money, and bemoaned the lack of interest among people he had approached with the idea.

--The View From UML--

¶13. (C) Khim Lal Bhattarai, the ANNFSU-UML President, also had ideas that differed from his party's official policy. In contrast to CPN-UML interlocutors who urged party unity, caution against the Maoists, and thoroughness in the draft constitution for the way forward (reftels), Bhattarai suggested to Emboff that the GON needed to keep up the momentum of political change and not get caught up in details, such as issues of representation, that could slow the peace process. He was optimistic that the Maoists could be trusted and declared that they should be included in the government even before the possible dissolution of Parliament. Bhattarai, a thirty-something veteran of both the 1990 and 2006 pro-democracy movements, has been in student politics for 18 years. He conveyed a desire to learn from his experience and ensure that April's People's Movement succeeded where previous uprisings had not.

COMMENT

¶14. (C) The ability to mobilize support at the grassroots level has given student organizations a vital role in Nepalese politics, enabling them to reach communities that the traditional politicians perched in Kathmandu cannot. Our interlocutors are insightful and dynamic, but they risk losing their idealism and becoming jaded in the face of old-fashioned resistance to change. Disgruntled youth like

Gagan Thapa, willing to use all resources regardless of physical risk and political censure, are a force that political parties cannot ignore. These young dissenters could over time become a major challenge to the mainstream parties, drastically changing the dynamics of the fledgling democracy. The parties need to pay closer attention to their youngest members, who have the potential one day to become great national leaders.

MORIARTY